

Hippocrates revisited

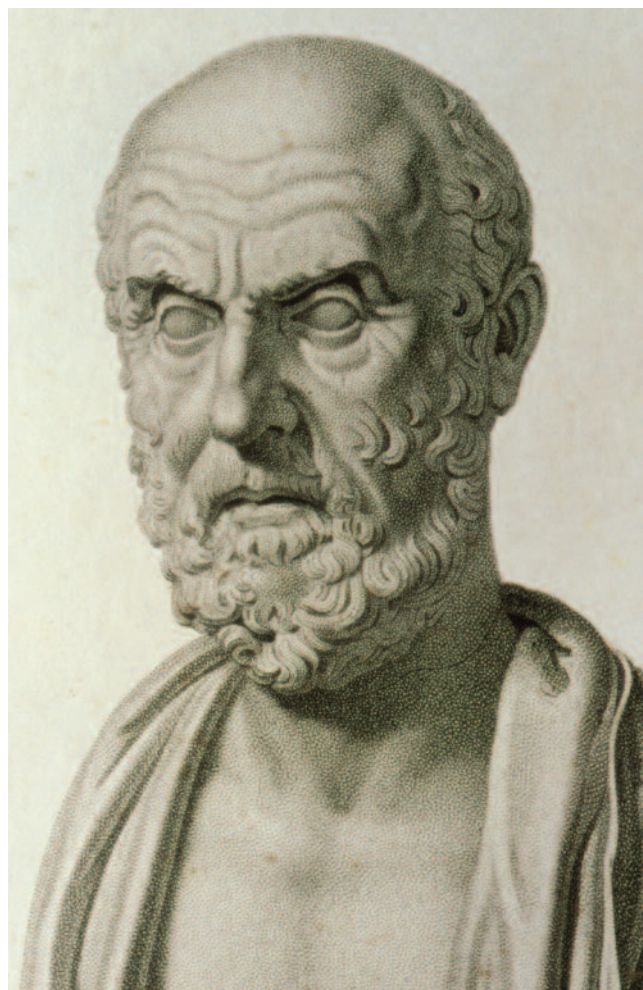
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The Hippocratic oath has been passed down from Greek antiquity and reminds us that medicine is not practised in an ethical vacuum.

Hippocrates was born on the small Greek island of Kos in the Aegean Sea (near the coast of Asia Minor) in 460 BC and died in Larissa, a town in mainland Greece, around 377 BC. Before his era, medicine was based on practical experience and drew its support from religious and superstitious beliefs rather than science. Hippocrates rejected the notion that illness was caused by divine powers and believed that treatment should be based on observation, reasoning and experience. Hippocratic medicine represents a landmark in the history of western medicine, being the precursor of evidence based medicine.

The Hippocratic oath

All the writings of Hippocrates and his pupils, including the Hippocratic oath and his famous Aphorisms, were compiled under the title *Corpus Hippocraticum* in the 3rd century BC. Most of the oath's content is relevant today, such as its emphasis on privacy. Moreover, the meaning of the oath can provide



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a focus for reflection and discussion about contemporary ethical issues in modern times, some 2500 years after the oath's genesis.

The box on page 69 contains a translated version of the classical Hippocratic oath as well as the more modern version, the Declaration of Geneva, adopted in 1948 by the World Medical Association.^{1,2}

Oaths today

Although it is not compulsory for practitioners to take an oath today, there has been a resurgence of oath-taking among medical students both here and abroad. Issues and questions that have arisen regarding the use of an oath in modern times include addressing the relevance of the original Hippocratic oath and balancing content with tradition.

Graduating US medical students and their families and teachers support the public act of oath-taking to an extraordinary degree – perhaps an indicator of the relevance of Hippocratic

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values in modern times. About three decades ago, US medical students noted discrepancies between what most of them believed and some of the proscriptions in the Hippocratic oath. Thus modern oaths were written and recited at graduation or declaration ceremonies for the public professing of newly minted physicians.

While it has become customary to allow students to choose their oath, there has been a remarkable trend towards renewed prominence of the ancient oath of Hippocrates. This is despite there being several other oaths, which are every bit as idealistic, often more complete and conceptual, and frequently more in

line with the most commonly held beliefs of the community.³

For whom is an oath taken?

Does taking an oath serve ourselves or our patients? From a patient perspective, the Hippocratic oath is synonymous with the practice of ethical medicine. Most patients, in my experience, believe that all doctors do indeed take the Hippocratic oath, while few patients know or have heard of the Declaration of Geneva. The prominent association of the Hippocratic oath with the ethical practice of medicine may serve to create a foundation for the trust in the doctor–patient relationship. In my

The Hippocratic oath and the Declaration of Geneva

The classical version of the Hippocratic oath¹

I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygeia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will fulfil according to my ability and judgement this oath and this covenant.

- To hold him who has taught me this art as equal to my parents and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art – if they desire to learn it – without fee and covenant; to give a share of precepts and oral instruction and all the other learning to my sons and to the sons of him who has instructed me and to pupils who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to the medical law, but no one else.
- I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgement; I will keep them from harm and injustice.
- I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.
- I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favour of such men as are engaged in this work.
- Whatever houses I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slaves.
- What I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of the treatment in regard to the life of men, which on no account one must spread abroad, I will keep to myself,

holding such things shameful to be spoken about.

- If I fulfil this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honoured with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.

The Declaration of Geneva: a modern-day rendition of the Hippocratic oath^{2*}

At the time of being admitted as a member of the medical profession:

- I solemnly pledge myself to consecrate my life to the service of humanity.
- I will give to my teachers the respect and gratitude which is due.
- I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity.
- The health of my patient will be my first consideration.
- I will respect the secrets which are confided in me, even after the patient has died.
- I will maintain by all the means in my power, the honour and the noble traditions of the medical profession.
- My colleagues will be my sisters and brothers.
- I will not permit considerations of age, disease or disability, creed, ethnic origin, gender, nationality, political affiliation, race, sexual orientation or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient.
- I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from its beginning even under threat and I will not use my medical knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity.
- I make these promises solemnly, freely and upon my honour.

¹The Declaration of Geneva was adopted by the 2nd General Assembly of the World Medical Association (WMA), Geneva, Switzerland, September 1948 and amended by the 22nd World Medical Assembly, Sydney, Australia, August 1968; and the 35th World Medical Assembly, Venice, Italy, October 1983 and the 46th WMA General Assembly, Stockholm, Sweden, September 1994.

Consultant's comment: a look at oath-taking in Australia

As is suggested by Dr Lolatgis, there is a growing trend for students of medicine to make a declaration or to take an oath at the time of graduation and admission as a member of the medical profession. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, with an increasing number of medical faculties throughout the world adopting a declaration in the last 20 years.^{1,2} Most medical schools have adopted variations of the Declaration of Geneva, which was recommended for this purpose by the World Medical Association in 1949 in response to atrocities committed by doctors in Nazi Germany during World War II.³

We have studied declarations being made by graduating medical students from eight medical faculties in Australia and New Zealand, and found that most statements are versions of the Declaration of Geneva.⁴ Our own medical faculty at the University of NSW supports final year students in writing their own declaration and each successive group since 1998 has developed a statement that is different in significant respects from its predecessor. However, these declarations have been influenced, to varying extents, by the Declaration of Geneva in that students refer to it when writing their own declaration.

The medical faculty at the University of NSW is the only faculty to have incorporated a declaration into its graduation ceremony. Faculties at other institutions have incorporated a statement as a part of a 'declaration ceremony', usually held prior to or immediately following a graduation ceremony.

In a previous discussion on the resurgence of oath-taking, Hurwitz and Richardson stated that one of the purposes for a medical oath is to 'declare the core values of the profession and to engender and strengthen the necessary resolve in doctors'.¹ We suggest that a declaration will more effectively 'engender and strengthen the necessary resolve' when students themselves have identified those core values. Young graduates are more likely to be committed to a statement of their own creation and choice and to give greater significance to a document if they, or their representatives, have written (or at least chosen) it. The process is as important as the final product in that students are developing and expressing their own values, working toward a consensual agreement and taking ownership of 'their' declaration.⁴

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view, the strength of this trust and relationship plays a powerful part in the healing process.

Conclusion

It is of note that in Australia, policemen and policewomen, members of the armed forces, new citizens, and officers of government take some form of oath at the commencement of their positions. I would like to see more widespread practice of providing medical students with the option of taking some form of oath at graduation. **MT**

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST: none.

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